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Can identification as Muslim increase support for reconciliation? The case of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic and national identities, as ingroup and superordinate identities, are key predictors for reconciliation, yet less research considers religious identity a superordinate identity.

Focusing on the reconciliation of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, this study aims to test a mediation model in which the relations between ethnic (i.e., Kurdish) and religious identifications (i.e., Muslim) and reconciliation outcomes were mediated by positive intergroup emotions. Moreover, to understand the diffusion of the conflict in a transnational context, this model is tested both in Turkey and Belgium among Muslim Kurdish minorities ($N = 141$). Kurdish minorities' levels of support for reconciliation and the ways they construe reconciliation were analyzed as two outcomes. For the latter, descriptions of reconciliation were first content-coded into seven themes. A latent class analysis of these themes led to two main construals: those endorsing a rights-based versus dialogue-based understanding of reconciliation; which was then used as a binary outcome. Results supported a similar mediation model in Turkey and Belgium. Accordingly, stronger religious identification as Muslim was associated with positive intergroup emotions and in turn more support for reconciliation, whereas stronger ethnic identification as Kurdish had the opposite effect. However, having Muslim identity as a superordinate identity was double-edged for the Kurdish minorities: while high Muslim identifiers were more supportive of reconciliation in general; they were also less likely to endorse a rights-based understanding of reconciliation (versus a dialogue-based reconciliation).

In today's world, most countries are composed of different ethnic, racial or religious groups between whom there is often a history of intergroup conflict or a potential for it (Neuberg et al., 2014). Intergroup conflicts not only affect those countries devastated by prolonged (armed) conflict between different groups but also more developed countries, for instance, with forced migration of refugees. Even when the violent conflict is over, the hostility between groups remain, creating a cradle for future conflicts. Reconciliation is thus an important step to achieve long-term peaceful relations following a violent conflict (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Kelman, 2004, 2008). Accordingly, we aim to explain the differences in minorities' levels of support for reconciliation as a desired outcome and in the ways they construe what reconciliation means for them (i.e., reconciliation construals). We focus on the case of Kurdish conflict in Turkey and its spill-over in Belgium, as the Kurds constitute the largest minority group in Turkey and the tension between Turkish majority and Kurdish minorities are a long-lasting issue that also affects Kurdish diaspora in Europe (Başer, 2013).

On the explanatory side, deriving from Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM, Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), we investigate the roles of ingroup and superordinate identities in explaining support for and construals of reconciliation. We focus on ethnic Kurdish

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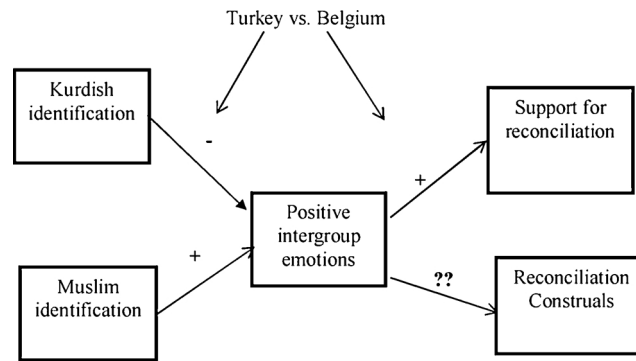


Fig. 1. The theoretical mediation model where positive intergroup emotions mediate the associations of Kurdish and Muslim identifications with support for and construals of reconciliation as outcome variables.

identity as an in-group identity and the Muslim religious identity as a superordinate identity. To our knowledge, religious identity has rarely been considered as a potential common identity. Several studies in the literature have established ethnic and national identities, as ingroup and superordinate identities, as the main predictors of reconciliation-related outcomes. Accordingly, the more members of the conflicting groups identify with a common national identity, termed as superordinate identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), the more likely they are to forgive the other group (Van Tongeren, Burnette, O'Boyle, Worthington, & Forsyth, 2014) or to dissent social distance (Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008). The opposite holds for identifying with an ethnic ingroup (on intergroup forgiveness, Van Tongeren et al., 2014). Past research considered religious identity mostly as in-group identity and studied religious subdivisions or the groups divided along religious and/or ethnic lines such as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Licata, Klein, Saade, Azzi, & Branscombe, 2012) or the Northern Ireland conflict (Moeschberger, Dixon, Niens, & Cairns, 2005; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). The Turkish case is unique in the sense that the opposing parties, Turks and Kurds are divided along ethnic lines but not along religious lines.¹ In this context, we aim to test whether Muslim identity as a common identity would facilitate reconciliation.

Moreover, we propose that the process through which Muslim identity facilitates reconciliation is through enhanced positive intergroup emotions. According to CIIM (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), if members of different groups perceive themselves as a more inclusive superordinate group, the former outgroup members would now be seen as ingroup members and thus they would be evaluated more positively, trusted more and liked better (Çelebi, Verkuyten, Köse, & Maliepaard, 2014; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor, Brown, Prentice, 2008). Accordingly, this study aims to test a mediation model in which the relations between ethnic (i.e., Kurdish) and religious identifications (i.e., Muslim) and reconciliation outcomes are mediated by positive intergroup emotions (see Fig. 1).

Finally, we aim to understand the diffusion of the conflict in a transnational context. The Kurdish conflict is no longer a concern only for Turkey, but, due to the Kurdish Diaspora, has increasingly become a European debate (Başer, 2013). We test whether this mediation model works similarly in Turkey and Belgium among Muslim Kurdish minorities.

To sum up, this study goes beyond previous research (1) by focusing on support for reconciliation and minorities' own understandings of reconciliation as two outcomes (beyond the usual focus on other intergroup outcomes such as forgiveness or on the scales of reconciliation with predetermined items), (2) by focusing on religious (Muslim) identity as a superordinate identity and positive emotions as the process through which it affects reconciliation (beyond the usual focus on national identities), and (3) by studying these relations comparatively both in Turkey and in diaspora (beyond the usual focus on the conflict situation only in the country or only in diaspora). In the remainder of the introduction, we will first explain how reconciliation is defined and studied in the literature and in this paper, then focus on the role of identity and intergroup emotions on the explanatory side, and finally we will describe the case of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and its spill-over in Belgium (Fig. 1).

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a most desired outcome for stable and lasting peace (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Kelman, 2008). However, both theoretically and empirically, it is hard to operationalize the term. Theoretically, its definition entails two seemingly-separate foci. The commonly-understood definition is that it is a psychological change in the motivations, beliefs, attitudes and emotions of the majority of society members (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004). Accordingly, reconciliation is generally considered as a psychological process of mutual acceptance, communication and respect (Kanazayire, Licata, Mélotte, Dusingizemungu, & Azzi, 2014; Noor, Brown, Prentice, 2008; Staub, 2006). This may also be called as the “socio-emotional route” to reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015). However, it has also been suggested that reconciliation is a structural change that requires political and economic integration. This may also be called as the “instrumental route” to reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015). So ideally for reconciliation, structural acts

¹ We focus on Muslim religious identification as a common identity. We do not believe the sectarian differences are relevant here as sectarian differences are similarly distributed across Turks and Kurds: The majority of both Turkish and Kurdish Muslims are from the Sunni sect, and only a minority are from the Alevite sect, a more liberal sect of Islam.

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